

The Second Coming by thedevotchka

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Summary:

In 1983, the so-called 'Loser's Club' defeated It, a monster who had plagued the town of Derry for millennia. In 1984, the new Librarian of the Hawkins Public Library makes a series of phone-calls after the suspicious and unpleasantly familiar disappearances of three children. Seasoned monster hunters, the Loser's Club teams up with another group of unlikely heroes- Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Will, Nancy, and Jonathan. There's no sleep for the wicked, and no rest for the good.

1. Mike Hanlon Makes a Call

In the six months since Mike Hanlon had packed up his modest home in Derry, Maine, he'd made and benefitted from a lot of positive changes. He was sleeping better for one thing, and the deep-set creases under his dark eyes had faded a little, and his complexion was less sallow, his skin a richer, warmer brown than before. And who wouldn't sleep better, once finally free of the Monster, of Derry, of IT? Who wouldn't sleep a little easier and eat a little more knowing that such a horror show was finally over, credits rolled out, house lights up. Hawkins, Indiana was a lot like Derry, but not in any way that frightened him. It was a quaint town, still holding on to the cheerful charm of the 40s and 50s, despite the teenage greaseballs on motorcycles riding up and down Main Street, whistling at the girls who loitered around the Record Stop after school. Hanlon surveyed the street from the first floor window of his office in the Hawkins Public Library. He surveyed this scene with some reluctance, however. He himself had not rode a motorcycle down Main Street in Derry, whistling at girls or goofing off with his pals. His gang, The Loser's Club, had disbanded in 1958 when they defeated It the first time, and they had never again been whole. Stan Uris had slashed his wrists in the bathtub not twenty minutes after he'd called in '83. He'd read about it in the paper. Eddie Kaspbrak, god love him, had lost an arm to It during the final confrontation down in the sewers, and bled out in a sorta heroic way. But after all that, it had been over, and they'd all agreed it had been worth it. Mike, who had felt tied to Derry since the day he was born, left on the very day they emerged from the sewers. The job in Hawkins hadn't been planned; he'd never even heard of the place, but he was pointed toward the town by a Hawkins native, local teacher by trade, who he'd met on the greyhound out of Bangor. With just short of sixty dollars in his savings account, he figured it was a good idea to take any job offered to him.

The real similarities between Derry and Hawkins began in earnest in early spring of 1984. Mike had, of course, heard about the missing kids in 83, it had happened not long before he'd arrived in town, but one had been found alive and well and the other was a teen who had most likely run away. These were not tragedies to Mike Hanlon, who

had seen the dismembered and disfigured corpses of his own classmates in 1958 and those of other local kids in 1983. To Mike Hanlon, a simple runaway was about as peaceful as it got. But in March 1984, the body of six-year-old Jamie Beckers washed up in the Hawkins quarry, minus his left leg and part of his right arm. There were bite marks around the ragged edges where his limbs had been pulled off. From the pictures he'd bribed out of a deputy at the Sheriff's department (up to your old tricks Mike is it starting again is it how) the boy's face had a stiff, glazed look that was more than familiar. Despite the missing limbs, Mike Hanlon was fairly sure the boy had died of fright.

"It can't be," he'd muttered lightly under his breath, sure his face was betraying the dawning dread he felt.

"Shouldn't be, small town like this, but there it is." The deputy caught a look at his face and shuffled his feet a little. "Say, Mr Hanlon, what do you want to look at those pictures for anyway? Aren't you a library man?" Mike had been prepared for this. Chief Rademacher back in Derry had regarded him first with suspicion and then with hostility when he'd started asking questions in '83, and the 'concerned citizen' bit would only get you so far.

"I've always had an interest in the macabre," Hanlon offered a grimace. "My friend, a good friend of mine is a horror writer, and I like to give him ideas when I can. His name is Bill Denbrough, if you've heard of him." The deputy reached a hand up to scratch his head, looking off to the side, but Mike had seen a brightness in his eyes. Bingo.

"That wouldn't be the fella who wrote 'The Black Rapids', would it? My wife liked that book a lot."

"The very same. Say, I think I'll ask him to come visit me here in Hawkins soon, stay a week or so. I'm sure he'd love to meet your wife, sign a few copies in person, what do you say?" The deputy was turning an unsavory shade of purple in his excitement.

"Oh, ayuh, I think she'd like that a whole lot. You're a good guy, Mr. Hanlon." Mike felt the blood drain from his face and an unpleasant sensation like pins and needles prick up behind the skin on his cheeks at the use of that expression so often used in Derry. Ayuh. He hadn't heard it anywhere in Indiana before.

"It's no problem," he said, sounding smoother than he felt. "Any friend of mine is a friend of Bill's."

"A friend, yeah. We're friends. So I guess I don't mind you looking at

those pictures, or passing the idea along to the writer. You'll tell him where you got the pictures for when he writes his book though, won't you? I think my wife would get a kick out of seeing my name in the credit line."

"Oh sure, sure I will." He wouldn't pass the name or the idea along, and any invite he did send Bill would be a summons back into the Hell they'd all been so certain had closed forever. He would not call Bill, or any of them, until and unless it became necessary. As before, he had to be 100 percent sure.

Only two days after the body of the Beckers kid washed up, Jenny and Jackie Kane, two beautiful twin girls of fourteen, were found mutilated in the stretch of woods out by the junkyard. They had been missing less than 24 hours, and had probably been killed on their way home from school. Their mother had not even reported their disappearance to the police because she'd gone to bed early the night before after taking some sleeping pills and had assumed they'd gone right to school in the morning without waking her. The bodies had been found by a couple of joggers around eight AM. The paper suggested animal attacks, but Mike knew better and wished he didn't. What he wouldn't give for a pack of feral wolves or a rabid bear. What he wouldn't give for a little normalcy. But there was none to be had, and with three dead in a matter of a few days, Mike Hanlon made a call.

"Hello, you've reached the office of Benjamin Hanscom. How can I direct your call?" The bubbly voice of Ben's receptionist lilted into the phone. It sounded alien against the bleak backdrop that had settled around Mike since he'd decided to make the call.

"I need to speak with Mr Hanscom on a private matter of some urgency."

"Who may I say is calling?"

"This is Mike Hanlon. He'll know the name."

"Alright sir, I'll see if Mr Hanscom is available. Hold please." Mike waited for the call-holding music, but the line clicked and Ben's voice came out of the speaker before it had a chance to start.

"Mike? Sheila said it was Mike Hanlon calling, is this Mike?"

"Yeah. Hi Ben. How's Bev?" Calling Ben Hanscom first was essentially killing two birds with one stone. After the final confrontation in Derry, Ben Hanscom had finally gathered the courage to ask Beverly

Marsh on a date. After a painful pre-adolescent summer of longing and several decades of complicated relationships with red-heads who were not Beverly, all it had taken was a bloody showdown with a monster as old as time.

"She's good. We both are. Mike, it's not like I'm not glad to hear from you, but-"

"I know. Believe me, Ben, I wouldn't be making this call if I didn't have to. You know how I hate to be the bearer of bad news."

"Yeah. And yet you always seem to be left with that job." Ben sounded weary, but not frightened. Probably he thought something unfortunate had happened, maybe that Bill had a stroke or Richie's trashmouth had gotten him knifed over a botched mugging.

"I... there isn't an easy way to say this, because we didn't swear again and I know you won't want to hear it, but..."

"But what? Why are you bothering me?" There was a pitchy, panicked note to Ben's voice now. Perhaps he'd started to sense something... the fear.

"I think It's back. I don't think... I don't think we killed it for good." There was a long silence on the other end of the phone, and Mike would have thought he'd hung up if it wasn't for the low sound of Ben's breathing.

"You're in Derry?" He asked eventually, quietly.

"No. I'm in Indiana, in a town called-"

"Indiana? For Chrissake, Mike, what do you think you're playing at? It is dead, and It is dead in Derry. Indiana, jeeeee-sus!"

"I know how it sounds! Maybe It's back and maybe it's something else, but there are three children dead here in less than a week. Limbs missing, torn clean off, bitemarks that look almost human... but mostly it's their faces, Ben. The little kids faces. It's like they died of pure fright. Looking at them is so much like looking at Huggins and Criss in the tunnels. I... do you believe me?" Mike hadn't realised it before, but he was desperate for Ben to believe him and to come.

"Believe you?" Ben replied softly. His voice had changed, had taken on a soft, hollow edge. "After everything we've been through together, I believe you. Mike I wish I didn't. I wish you hadn't called, even if that meant I never heard from you ever again in my whole goddamn life. Do you believe me?"

"Yes." It stung a little but Mike didn't allow it to hurt too much. He didn't blame Ben for that. And he couldn't feel too hurt, because he knew, by the sheer honesty in Ben's words and tone, that he would

come. And if he would come, Bev would, and probably Bill too. Probably Richie, too.

"I'll come. I'll ask Bev, too, but I won't ask her to come, you understand me? This is not the same as before, I know that, because It is dead and we made sure It was, and we lost Eddie when we killed it, but I'll come because you're asking me to, and I'll help if I can. But I won't ask Bev to come, Mike."

"I appreciate that. I called you, not her. And I'll call Bill and Richie, but I'll leave you to talk to Bev however you want to, Ben."

"Alright." Ben sighed. "So you called me first. Last time you called Stan first, and he killed himself. I'm not going to do that, but it's as sure as shit bad omen that you called me first."

"I shoulda called Bill first."

"On that we can agree. Call him second. Where did you say you were?"

"I didn't. It's Hawkins, Indiana. I'm at the Hawkins Public Library."

"Jee-sus." Ben whistled low through his teeth. "Feels a lot like trying to see to the future through a funhouse mirror."

"Being a Librarian is what I'm good at, I make no apology."

"I know. I'll leave tonight, I need to explain to Bev and she's at work for now."

"That's alright. Look me up when you get here, or just come by the library. I'll wait for you."

"Alright. Bye, Mike. I... I guess I'll see you soon."

"I guess you will. Bye Ben." The line clicked off and Mike felt a feeling of loss wash over him. He had known Ben in one form or another for the whole of his meaningful life, and had trusted him implicitly, but as the call ended he had felt sure that Ben had just lied to him. About coming probably not, but about telling Bev? Maybe. Because Bev would come, Mike knew that and Ben probably knew it too. And coming here would be dangerous.

2. The Loser's Club Gets a Rebrand

Summary for the Chapter:

The Loser's Club, class of '58 meets again under the watchful but uninvited eyes of four curious boys.

"Sure, I'll come." Stuttering Bill Denbrough, who had not stuttered over a single word since leaving Derry for the final time, had not needed to think about whether he would go to Hawkins, Indiana. Things had been good for him the past six months or so. He'd written a new novel, and the manuscript was currently sitting on his agent's desk with a golden star sticker on as a HIGH PRIORITY JOB, a job well done. It would be published in the summer, and Bill had been assured it would be a best seller. Things with Audra had never been so good, he'd never so much as dared believe she could love him so completely, knowing everything, but she did and he was grateful.

It had been rocky at the start and Audra had been badly hurt, but the more miles Bill put between them and Derry, the better she'd been. She didn't blame him for anything, and greater still, she thought he was a hero of sorts. She didn't think he'd gotten his brother Georgie killed in '57 and she didn't think he'd gotten Eddie killed in '83. She'd whole-heartedly forgiven him for his brief affair with Beverly Marsh, accepting his honest apology and admission that he had believed it was his last night on earth and that he'd wanted to spend it feeling loved. Childhood love was not the same sort of intense, deep-set love, not like the love he had for Audra, but it was pure and good and had gotten him through that night. Sometimes he thought maybe he caught her watching him when he talked to women at parties, but that could have been his imagination, but (guilty, your guilty conscience Bill, because you love Beverly, you love her more and she knows it she can see) for the most part things were better than he had any right to expect.

"Who was that on the phone?" Audra rounded the corner into their open plan kitchen, wearing one of his smart shirts and nothing else. Bill wanted to reach for her, draw her close and maybe take her over the counter, but he didn't.

"Mike Hanlon." He tried to keep his voice level and pleasant, but she jerked her head up as though slapped by an invisible hand.

"Mike Hanlon? From... from before?"

"Ayuh." Good Jesus, there it was, he hadn't said that in years, not since he was a child, and he wasn't even going back to Derry and yet Mike had said it had started again and that was impossible but it felt the same.

"What did he want?" Her voice was thin and reedy but her gaze was intense. She was willing him to say there had been a death or a birthday invite or maybe Bev and Ben were getting married or *anything* she would take *anything* or even no news is good news, but-

"He's moved to a town in Indiana. Three kids have been killed in the last week and it looks like-"

"No, don't you dare say it Bill don't you *dare*!" Audra wailed, fisting her auburn hair in shaking hands and pulling. The sudden pain helped to focus her mind a little, which was good, because she knew the next words out of Bill's mouth might well send her right over the edge into loonsville.

"I have to go, Audra. I don't think it's the same thing as before, not It, we killed It and I know that, but it's something. If Mike's asking us to come, then it's something, and I have to go."

"The others, too?" She asked, miserable. He'd made up his mind on the phone already, and Audra had no desire to go a few rounds with him. She'd tried that before and he'd left anyway.

"He's called Ben, and they'll come. I think Richie will, too."

"Not Eddie though, Eddie or Stan. They won't come. Can't because they're dead." She said it coldly, and took some satisfaction in the way Bill winced.

"It's as much for them as for Mike. If this is the same sort of thing, I didn't think there could be more than one It but maybe there can and it's killing kids, Audra. Little kids, like Georgie." The mention of Bill's dead kid-brother closed all avenues of protest for Audra. It was a

weak move and they both knew it, but Bill had won by default.

"Fine. You go on, get yourself hurt or maybe killed doing a job that isn't yours. Don't expect me to follow you this time."

"You don't know what a relief that is," Audra opened her mouth to yell, but the look on his face killed the words in her throat. His skin was ashy and sallow-looking, mouth set in a wavering, grim line angling towards a frown. "It was quite literally my worst nightmare, seeing you down in those tunnels. Having you in Derry. I would give my life to stop you going to Indiana."

"You might be giving your life anyway," she retorted quietly. Bill let that hang in the air for a moment, then approached his wife with cautious little steps.

"If I didn't go. If I abandoned my friends when they needed me, maybe letting more little kids die, would you truly be happy with that?"

"No. You wouldn't be you if you did that, and I can't be so selfish." The words hurt to say because they were true.

"You'll stay here, won't you?"

"I will," she mumbled against his shoulder, allowing him to pull her gently against him. She felt warm and safe in his arms, and made a mental note of how his body curved against hers, because she felt she might never feel him hold her again.

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"Call for you, Rich." Richie Tozier had been enjoying a midday scotch and cigarette break between segments when his manager held up a phone in the sound room. He rolled his eyes, but took the call.

"Richie Tozier, at your service. Or Kinky Briefcase, or Buford Kissdrivel, or-"

"Richie, it's me, it's Mike Hanlon."

"Ma-ike Hanlon as I live n'breathe." Richie's voice naturally sloped into the pickaninny voice from his childhood, a voice he hadn't done in earnest since he was eleven and at all since leaving Derry.

"Beep beep, Richie." It really was Mike Hanlon.

"What's going on, Mikey? I'm guessing this isn't so much a courtesy call."

"Not so much. There's no easy way to say it, but this is my third call today and I'm too tired to bring you into it gently. It's back, It's not dead, and I need your help." Richie had been expecting the words, and maybe even hoping for them. The cold certainty that settled around him was like a safety blanket he didn't know he'd been missing.

"Home, to Derry?" He asked softly.

"No. I'm in Indiana, in a town called Hawkins, it's-"

"Not Derry? My friend, you must be mistaken. It doesn't move, it is Derry for Chrissake, It isn't in Indiana."

"Look I know more about this thing than anyone else, I watched and studied it for my whole damn life while you all forgot. I know the signs, don't you wish I didn't? Don't you think I'd rather be doing anything else than calling you all here? There are three children dead here, limbs torn off, human-like bite marks, and faces like they've seen the worst thing in the universe and straight-up died of fear. You hearing me?"

"I hear you. I'll come, you know I will. Not because we promised and not because I think you're right, not yet. But because you asked, and you wouldn't lie."

"Friends don't lie," Mike replied, and wondered why the words sent a foreign chill down his spine, like someone else had said them from inside his brain.

Mike had intended to close the Library a little early to give himself time to gather what he'd need to convince the others. He needed to stop by the sheriffs department and find his deputy friend, and he needed to go home and get his newspaper clippings. He hadn't had much time to look into the history of Hawkins, but that was alright. He didn't think there was much to find, it wasn't a hidden cesspool like Derry. Up until the Byers boy had disappeared last November the town had been as squeaky clean as small-town America could get. The terrible feeling that somehow It had followed him here wouldn't stop picking at his brain, even though he had moved here *after* November. It still felt... related. Mike Hanlon had intended to close the Library a little early, but there was a group of kids huddled around the little occult shelf and they would not leave.

"Can I help you boys with something?" Four guilty faces spun to meet his, and he noticed with some surprise that the smallest of the boys was Will Byers.

"No, sir, no thank you." A boy with a mop of unruly curls and too-few teeth flashed him a grin.

"That's an interesting subject matter. Maybe not such good reading for boys like yourself. I might suggest the funnybooks in the young adult section."

"We'll look there too, thanks. We, uh, we were looking for stuff about vampires and werewolves and stuff, you know like horror books." This kid stepped a little forward from the others, sounded more sure of himself, and looked Mike in the eye. He reminded Mike of Stuttering Bill as he had been in 1958, the unspoken leader of the Losers Club.

"I think I'd be getting some complaints from your parents if I let take that stuff home, but I think I can show you a few things here, for a moment." Mike reached up past the occult shelf and pulled a few horror comics from the shelf. "These are for grown-ups really, they're comics but they're from adult horror books. Lotta gruesome pictures. Go on over to the desks and have a look." Mike handed the novel to the leader of the group and watched them slink off to a nearby table.

The door at the front of the Library opened with a little puff of warm spring air, and Mike Hanlon looked up. Beverly Marsh looked as good now as she had a year ago, maybe better. She had put on a little weight, and it suited her. The smile she was wearing looked comfortable and easy and that suited her too. Ben Hanscom suited her.

"Beverly! I didn't think you were coming!"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away." After a pause, she added, "Neither could Ben, though he sure did try. It's good to see you, Mike."

"Glad to see you, wish you weren't here." She nodded in reply, then stepped forward to embrace him.

"Ben's just parking up. It was odd, walking up here, I had the strangest feeling, this library... it doesn't look like Derry Public, and yet..."

"I know. The towns have their similarities, don't they?"

"I like this Library a whole lot more, even without the glass corridor," Ben Hanscom had appeared in the doorway behind them, accompanied by Richie Tozier, who looked... tired, and peaky. No one looked all that frightened, it wasn't like last time. *That's because they don't believe you, Mikey, they're just humouring you because you're alone and you're poor and you really got the SHORT STRAW in this game*, Mike brushed these thoughts from his mind and stepped forward to shake first Ben's hand, then Richie's.

"Thank you for coming, both of you. Really. I have... I have a lot to show you, and I think after I do you'll want to stay."

"I hope you're wrong about that," Richie said with a smile.

"Would that I were. Either of you see Bill on your travels into town?"

"Nope. Bev and I flew into Indianapolis a few hours ago, and took a car from there."

"Ditto," Richie nodded.

"I don't know where in the world he's living at the moment, so I guess it could take a little while. Would you all like to sit in my office whilst I try to call him? Audra might know where he is."

"If you don't mind I'd like to look around. I don't get into Libraries much." Of course that was Ben.

"Sure thing. Mind out for those kids reading horror comics, though." Ben looked around the empty library and pointed to the block of desks. The horror comic, Salem's Lot, by Stephen King, had been left on the desk, open to a particularly gory scene.

"Huh. They could have at least put the book back. Oh well. Bev, Richie, you want a drink? I got some beers in the fridge."

"Sounds wonderful," Bev licked her bottom lip subconsciously.

"C'mon up." The three left Ben Hanscom to roam the shelves and went upstairs to wait for Bill.

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They did not have to wait long. Bill arrived just as the sun was setting, still less than 24 hours since the telephone call.

"Bill my buddy!" Richie called from the first floor door of Mike's office. "Where in the name of our lord and saviour have you been?"

"California, same as you, trashmouth. Couldn't get a car from the airport, last one went to some faaam-OUS radio DJ, had to wait for a bus."

"The early bird catches the worm," Richie replied pleasantly.

"Everybody else here?" Bill asked, looking around as Ben emerged from the stacks where he'd been reading the back covers of some new travel books. Mike and Bev appeared behind Richie at the top of the stairs, and a look passed between Bev and Bill that was unreadable

and made Ben flush with something like jealousy.

"Glad you're here, Bill. Could you shut that door behind you and bolt it?"

"Sure thing, Mike." Bill did as bid and then joined the group, who had congregated around the tables in the reading area.

"Give us the low-down, Mikey boy," Richie said solemnly, and Mike, though feeling a touch of irritation, grinned.

"We all know the pattern, and some of it's the same and some of it's not. We also know that the pattern can be changed by intervention, as we stopped the killings early in 1958 and stopped them, perhaps permanently in 1983. I know it has not been 27 years. I know that, so don't any of you say it. The rest of the pattern feels too much like truth to me, and I made a mistake last time, waiting for nine children to be killed before contacting you all. Three have died so far, and I won't allow there to be a fourth if I have something to do about it."

"I understand what you're saying, Mike. But It's dead. In 58 we knew it might not be, that's why we made the promise to come back if it started again. But It's dead now, it *has* to be."

Across the Library, wedged firmly and uncomfortably behind the occult shelves, were four boys holding their breaths with wide eyes and pale, shocked faces.

"I know that voice," Mike Wheeler, unofficial leader of the group, whispered. He slowly raised his head and peered through the gap between the tops of the books and the shelves. "It's him! It's Bill Denbrough, the guy who wrote that horror book I stole off my dad! *Black Rapids!*" The exclamation was a whisper, but the excitement was clear.

"How'd you know, Mike?" Dustin lisped.

"Saw him on Letterman talking about some film he did with his wife, she's that actress with the really red hair," Mike explained.

"Is that her?" Will was now looking through the gap, and he nodded toward Bev.

"I can't see, but I don't think so. Sounds different." They all accepted this immediately, because it was Mike who had said it and he knew these things.

"Is anyone else actually listening to what they're talking about?" Lucas cut in, a scathing look on his face. The others shut up and listened harder.

"The Demogorgon?" Dustin's eyes widened. "They're talking about the Demogorgon?"

"Or something like it. They're talking about those kids that have died."

"Do you think they know about the Upside Down? What do you think, Mike?" Mike had become very still and very pale as he listened to these strange adults talk about killing a monster. Nine people. Their monster had killed nine people, and they thought, at least the Librarian did, that it was the same monster who had come to Hawkins. If these adults knew about it, knew how to kill it... maybe they *did* know something about the Upside Down. Maybe they knew something about Eleven. Without really thinking it through, Mike Wheeler stepped out from behind the stacks in a move that took more unthinking courage than standing up to Troy or even the Demogorgon. Mike Wheeler stepped out from behind the stacks and put his faith in a group of grownups.

3. Mike Wheeler Meets the Writer

Like the unthinking decision to step out and reveal himself to the group, his rapid labelling of the adults had been an unconscious one. The Lady had jumped pretty hard when he appeared, and her chair thumping back down on the wooden boards was the only sound for an agonising few seconds. The Librarian shot up with an expression that was less surprise and more anger; it didn't suit his face, and Mike had trouble connecting this man to the kindly guy who'd offered them the horror comic just a few hours before.

"What do you think you're doing, son? The Library is closed, but I think you know that." His voice was calm, but that was somehow worse than shouting. When adults got all calm about a kid who'd done something bad, it was a whole other kind of anger.

"I do believe, I do BUH-LIEVE this yankee-doodle's been snoopin'." That was the loudmouth, or the trashmouth, he'd been called. Mike thought the nickname fit.

"C'mon now, out you go. Are your friends here, too? Hiding somewhere?" The Librarian had come around the front of the desk and Mike was sure he was going to charge at him, but he didn't. He headed for the deadbolt on the door, probably meaning to throw them out. Mike was about ready to hurl his guts.

"Wait, Mike." Mike felt a jolt go through him at the gentle, pensive voice of The Writer. He was the only person at the table who had seemingly no reaction to Mike's sudden appearance, and now he'd addressed him by name. Psychic, he thought. Like Eleven, maybe the secret voice inside him suggested. Mike felt his heart speed up and a fine layer of perspiration coat his palms.

"How'd you-"

"Bill, I don't know what crazy thought you're starting to think but I suggest you unthink it right now," The Librarian was looking at Bill and Bill rolled his head slightly to look at him.

"It's okay, Mike. I think... if it's the same as before, like you say, then we're being led. This is part of it." The Librarian huffed, but didn't say anything more and didn't slide open the deadbolt on the door, either. The Writer turned back to Mike who was still standing dumb and bewildered just to the side of the stacks. He could hear the very light, whispering squabbles of his friends. Dustin would want to back him up, Lucas would want to hang back. Will would want to listen a

little more, and that was alright.

"What's your name?" The Writer was certainly addressing him now, and Mike realized the Librarian was probably called Mike, too. Not psychic then. Not like Eleven, you stupid baby son of a-

"Mike Wheeler. Uh, sir."

"Mike Wheeler. Hi. I'm Bill. This is Ben. And Beverly, and you may already be acquainted with your Librarian, Mike. Hanlon. And this great asshole to my right is Richie. He does a lot of voices, but he's no good."

"I thought they were pretty good," Mike felt his face flush.

"Dee boy knows dee talent when he see it."

"Shut up, Richie." The Librarian had come around the front of the desks and was looking toward the stacks to Mike's left. "The rest of your gang back there, are they?"

"I-uh," Mike did not want to tell on them, but how could he cover for them with The Librarian only a few steps away. They hadn't been hiding in a very good place.

"Yes, sir." Dustin's lispy voice popped out from behind the stacks, and a half a second later so did the boy himself. A dark brown hand dropped quickly away from his arm, where Lucas had obviously been trying to pin him to the floor.

"Alright then. Cards on the table, we've told you our names, Mike Wheeler, and that is with the assumption your friends heard them too. It's only right for us to know all of yours too, don't you think?" The Librarian was being reasonable, and the calm but deadly edge had gone out of his voice. Probably because The Writer had said it was okay.

"Dustin, sir." Dustin had stepped out from behind the stacks, quite obviously stepping over Lucas in the process. Will stood next.

"Will Byers. Sir."

"Will Byers. You factor into our conversation a little, I recall." Will only nodded, not willing to say anything about the Monster until they'd discussed it properly.

"Down there is Lucas. He's being a real baby." Dustin pointed to the stacks, and Lucas made a huffing sound and stood up.

"Wouldn't have to if Mike could have just kept his ass on the ground like we planned."

"Why'd you plan to spy?" The Lady didn't sound mad, just curious. She was studying each of the boys in turn, and Mike felt his cheeks flush again under her stare. She was pretty, for an older lady.

"We, uh I don't know." Dustin looked toward Mike. They all did. It had been his idea, after all.

"I don't know, lady. We just did, okay? We saw you and the other guys come in and it looked like something big so we just... got down there to wait for a while. We weren't spying." He crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

"You were. But that's alright." The Writer. "I think we all need to get a few more of our cards on the table. I think a lot of this can be cleared up just by playing with a full deck. Are we agreed?" He was addressing his group, who all nodded. Mike felt the ridiculous urge to pose the question to his friends, too, like they were some organized team of grown-ups sitting round a table. He nodded for himself, and was pleased to see the others were, too. Even Lucas.

"Only because you're the Librarian and I like coming in here," Lucas put in. He sounded grumpy, but they could deal with that later.

"No, if you don't want to be here, any of you, you can go. No questions asked. All we'd suggest is that you don't share anything you may have overheard in here with anyone else. Okay? Agreed?"

"Agreed." Mike did speak for them all then. He thought Lucas might go for the door but he didn't. It was beginning to look like Mike's impulse to make contact with these adults may have been the right decision. And after what had happened, any extra information or help they could get would be welcome.

"Right then. Why don't you all come and sit down with us." It wasn't phrased as a question, and the boys seated themselves along the desk running parallel to the adults.

"Have you heard of the Upside Down?" Mike hadn't meant to lay down quite so many of his cards at once, but it was, after all, the deep-down burning question. Said question was met with frowns and confusion.

"They have no idea what you're talking about!" Dustin whined. He scooted his chair back, presumably to leave, when The Writer put a hand on the desk in front of him. Dustin stopped moving.

"We've not heard that term before, but it could be a different word for the same thing. We call our monster It, but it had other names. Many, many other names. And other hiding places too, although we found it most often in the sewers of Derry. We are coming at what may be the same problem from two very different angles, and I think we need to be a little patient with each other." Mike saw the sense in this. They'd named the Upside Down themselves and it probably

wasn't what any adult would call it.

"The Upside Down is like, another dimension." Mike began. He heard rustling behind him and Dustin pulled out a sketch of the flea and the acrobat. The adults leaned in close to look at it, but none of them laughed, and that was good. Mike jabbed a finger at the stick man on the paper. "So the acrobat can move back and forwards on this tightrope, okay?" He glanced at them all to make sure they were listening and more importantly that they weren't laughing yet.

"Okay, sure. The acrobat and the flea, I've seen this before." The Writer scanned the picture and pointed towards the dot. "The flea can go back and forth and side to side, because it's smaller. That's the second dimension. Right?" Mike flushed with pleasure at the unsure, questioning tone in The Writer's voice. He was looking to him as the authority on the matter. Mike soldiered on, knowing Dustin would correct him if he got anything wrong.

"Right. But the other dimension, the one the flea can get to, it's like, really small. So the acrobat can't get to it and doesn't even know it's there, unless something rips open a passageway into the first and then I guess the acrobat might be able to see it or move into it. You dig?"

"We dig." A corner of The Writer's mouth quirked up.

"I get it all, Dustin?"

"That's about it. The second dimension is the Upside Down."

"Is it different to this one? I mean, did you know it was different?" The Lady asked.

"It was different." Will spoke quietly, and his eyes were firmly on the worn surface of the desk in front of him.

"Different how?" Trashmouth hadn't picked up on the tone of his voice, or he wouldn't have asked. Mike could see it in their faces, a sudden reluctance to look at Will, like maybe they knew what he had to say would be real bad.

"It looked kinda the same, but like something had happened, an accident or a nuclear war or something. The buildings on Main were the same, but all the windows were dark, and there weren't any other people. Uh, I mean, alive ones."

"Oh God," The Lady moaned, pushing her knuckles against her mouth until they were bleached white with pressure. She believed him.

"And the air was wrong. I could breathe it, but it made me sick. Probably if I'd been stuck in there much longer it would have killed

me.” Will said this matter-of-factly but Mike heard the quaver in his voice and knew he was still very much haunted.

“How long were you in there for?”

“About a week, but time passed... differently, I think. Or at least it felt that way.”

“A week,” The Quiet One mused. It was the first time he’d spoken, and Mike couldn’t remember his name. Couldn’t remember any of their names but Bill in truth, but he’d been under a lot of pressure during the introductions part. He’d ask Lucas later, Lucas was wild about remembering things, especially names and whether Mike owed him a quarter or not.

“But you’re alright now?” The lady had pried her hand from her mouth but her knuckles had left red indents around her lips that were somehow gruesome. She reached a pale hand out towards Will and then stopped and withdrew it. Probably not a mother, Mike thought.

“Oh sure. I think I get sick a little more now.”

“Boys always got a cold,” Dustin added unhelpfully.

“But the important thing is, he’s safe now. He’s safe, but someone else is still trapped in there somewhere. And she...” Mike had to swallow around a lump that had mysteriously began to form in his throat. “She is not safe at all.”

“Mike...” Lucas’s voice was tentative, and the hand he placed on Mike’s shoulder was soft and light, but Mike shrugged him off.

“She’s still in there. Her name is Eleven and she’s my friend and she’s still in there with the monster. Can you help us?” He was pretty sure he was gonna cry or puke if no one said anything in about a second, but he kept his gaze level and met each of their eyes.

“We’ll help if we can, Mike. But I think we need to hear the rest.”

4. Nancy Wheeler Takes a Walk

It had always closed before. Nancy found herself in this stretch of forgotten forest more and more often in the months since Barb had died. At first it hadn't been a conscious decision at all, she'd been driving around with Jonathan, stopping occasionally to take pictures of anything he found particularly bleak or interesting. He really was a lovely photographer, and he had a good eye, so she'd let him do most of the calling out stopping points. But she'd seen a flash of something in the forest and slammed her hand on the dashboard without thinking about it at all. Jonathan had squeezed the breaks and pulled to the side, but Nancy was out of the car and pelting towards the thick row of trees before the engine cut out. He'd chased her as she knew he would, and she knew in a vague, frightened part of her mind that this was something akin to climbing into the jaws of a lion for no apparent reason, but she ran onward anyway, her feet flying over strewn logs and half hidden roots that should have turned her ankle every three or four steps.

"Nancy! Wait up, Nancy, Nancy!" There was panic in Jonathan's voice, and maybe anger, too. But she'd seen something. Something that felt like a memory... that was when she'd seen the rotted, bloated base of a tree just off the path. It was surrounded by a thick growth of something scummy and putrid looking, and there was a faint trail of delicate-looking tendrils leaking from the jagged gash in its front. She'd seen something like this before, and knew it was an entry-point for the monster. Had she seen the monster, that flash of something pale and alien but so familiar, through the trees?

No.

That monster was dead. Mike had said so, and he had been so sure. He said Eleven had saved them all and killed it, and there had to be truth in that, too. The girl had been powerful and strange in ways Nancy didn't understand, but she was gone now and her little brother's grief and pain had been a tangible presence ever since. And Jonathan's little brother had come back, along with the Sherriff and Joyce Byers, and that meant something too, didn't it? Barb hadn't come back, and that loss, that guilt had probably driven Nancy into

the forest that day with Jonathan in pursuit and on many days since, alone. She was not precisely sure whether she was conducting any kind of study of these bloated, diseased passages, but she did have a vague map in her mind of where each was, and she was fairly confident that she knew when they opened and when they closed again.

There were rules to them; never more than three open at once, and the three that were open were not all the same. Nancy had unofficially named them 'In' 'Out' and 'Shadow'. She was sure In and Out went to the same place, the Upside Down like Mike called it, but Shadow was a smoky question-mark. She'd not dared to go in to any of them, she wasn't *suicidal*, but she had crouched before a Shadow hole and flattened herself to the damp earth with her cheek against the ground, and looked. It had been grey and thick in there, the air, if you could call it that, was cloying and toxic to look at. And had there been a light, somewhere deep inside that pulsed in a garish orange beat like a diseased heart? Nancy couldn't be sure, because looking into that hole was like looking into madness, and it had been all she could do to roll limply onto her back and stare at the sky, the real and present sky, until the urge to scream had subsided and the persistent, tugging pull of her sanity trying to tear free from her brain had subsided.

On that morning as she crossed the deserted forest in the milky light of a rising sun hidden by intense cloud cover, she'd stumbled, quite literally, against an upturned root in front of a hole that should not have been there. They had always closed before. Always opened in threes and closed in threes, over a span of three days. This was a rule and rules (all living things must abide all living things) were not broken. Nancy was afraid, but mostly she was outraged at this injustice.

She didn't know, couldn't have known, that across town her little brother and his friends were rolling their bikes slowly home, none of them talking, their faces blank and vacant and something uncomfortable in their eyes. They had spent the night in the Hawkins

Library, learning from and teaching a small group of haunted strangers who had come to slay a monster. Nancy couldn't have known this, and so she didn't connect this strange new hole with the arrival of the strange new faces. She *did* know, however, that three children had died in the past week, in gruesome and inhuman ways, and she was bright enough to put these things together.

She'd suspected the monster wasn't dead, anyway. She'd known for certain it wasn't when she'd started finding the holes in the trees, but she'd suspected before. It was a feeling, like the beginnings of a panic attack, and they'd started low in her belly on the night of the showdown with the monster, when it had disappeared (escaped you had it trapped and you let it go) and the feeling was supposed to go away when it was dead, when Mike had told them what happened. It certainly *sounded* dead. Incinerated, even. But the feeling hadn't gone away, and looking into this new hole, that looked ragged and violent, as though it had been forced open rather than expanded into being in an unnaturally natural way, she was sure it wasn't dead. And that it had *made* this hole rather than just using an open one. Maybe that was the difference? The silky grey tendrils of stuff were leaking more heavily from this hole than any other previously. A little of it slipped towards the ground and almost touched her sneakered foot, she drew it back and accidentally kneed herself in the chest, but hardly noticed the breathless pain in her fright. She shuffled back on the forest floor a few crawling paces before finally gathering enough courage to turn her back on it and run. She'd get Jonathan, he wouldn't mind being woken up this early, probably, and he'd know what to do. If there was a part of Nancy that was hoping the hole would close before she got back to it, or even better that it had been a product of her tired and overworked imagination, that part would have been severely disappointed.

"One more time." Nancy sighed, exasperated, and rolled her eyes at the sleepy, swaying boy in the doorway.

"I've been finding holes in the trees, like the one I went through when we were hunting the monster." She'd meant to speak more

slowly this time, but found it impossible. “But this morning I found one that shouldn’t be there, it-“

“None of them should be there.”

“No, no I *know* that, but this one is *more* wrong than the others. There are patterns to how and where and when they appear, and this one is out of sync, it’s just... it’s different, I know what I mean, you’ll get it when you see it.”

“I’m not going into those woods with you, Nance.”

“What?” Nancy felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. She took a step back, searching Jonathan’s face for any sign he was joking. “You... you have to?”

“Says who? Why should I. Why should *you*, for that matter. Barb is gone. I’m sorry about that. But we’re not. And Will’s back. It’s not our responsibility anymore.”

“Three people are dead, Jonathan.”

“I know...” Jonathan scratched the back of his head and sniffed. “And I’m sorry about that, but they weren’t my people, you know?”

“They were kids. Little kids.” Nancy’s voice had dropped to a whisper.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“Little kids like Mike. And like Will.”

“It’s not the same.” Jonathan said sharply, but he wouldn’t meet her eyes now. Nancy felt bitter hot tears of anger and disappointment sting and blur her vision.

“It is. It is the same. I’m sorry I came here. I should have asked to see Will instead. He’s twice as brave and three times as selfless as you.”

Jonathan looked at her for a moment that felt like a very long time.

Nancy's clenched fists were shaking, and she hated being scrutinized by his wounded stare.

"Alright then," he said finally. "I'll get him." Without another word, Jonathan turned back into the house and slammed the front door shut on Nancy. *I've hurt him* she thought, and then... *good*. The door opened about a minute later, just as Nancy was getting ready to head back into the woods alone, sure Jonathan had gone back to bed. But then there he was, looking breathless and now wearing a coat and a pair of scuffed sneakers.

"Will's not in his room." He looked panicked, and Nancy took a moment to allow herself to revel in this. It made her feel small and mean, but she didn't care. Jonathan was back in the game because he thought Will was in trouble maybe, and Nancy would remember that. She'd remember what kind of person Jonathan was in that moment.

"Are you sure he was last night? He might be sleeping over at one of the others. Not my house I don't think, I'd have heard them keeping half the street awake with their games and ghost stories in the basement if they had."

"I don't know for sure. I got in late last night, I was..." He coughed and looked away.

"We should check at Dustin and Lucas's." Nancy said.

"I'll drive." With Nancy a few paces behind him, Jonathan allowed his panic to subside. He felt stupidly grateful that she hadn't pressed him on that slip-up comment he'd made. He wasn't yet ready to tell anyone about where he went at night, and he didn't think he'd *ever* be able to tell Nancy. She'd look at him... well probably like she'd looked at him a few minutes ago, only *worse*. Only more. But if things went right, then she would be safe. Everyone would be. If things only went-

"I thought you were like really worried about your brother." Jonathan snapped round to the sound of Nancy's voice. He was standing on the driver side of the car, but he hadn't made a move to put his keys in the door. She was looking at him with a half-smirk on her face and he felt his own heat up in response. She was beautiful.

Careless with her affection, and still hopelessly devoted to Steve, but beautiful all the same.

“Sorry,” he managed, mashing the key toward the keyhole in the hopes it would look smooth. It didn’t and it took three tries to get it in, and he scratched his own paintwork quite badly. If Nancy noticed, she didn’t say anything, and Jonathan was more than glad about that. He’d probably have spontaneously combusted if she’d laughed at him.

The drive was silent as they approached Dustin’s house. He lived in a pretty cul-de-sac reasonably close to Will’s, and the two of them spent the most time together out of the four boys so it was a logical first step.

“Well go on then.” Jonathan glanced at Nancy, who gestured towards the house.

“What?”

“Go on and knock. See if he’s there.”

“It... it’s six AM. I knock now and whether he’s there or he’s not I’m likely to get shot by Dustin’s father.” Nancy laughed.

“Alright. Alright, it’s early. Go round back and see if Will’s bike is on the back porch.”

“A better idea.” Jonathan hauled himself out of the car and crept around the back of the house. Will’s bike was not there, but neither was Dustin’s. Jonathan tried to swallow down the fresh wave of panic this brought. They could still check at Lucas’s, and Mike’s too, because Nancy couldn’t tell for sure they weren’t there. Maybe they’d all been playing late and fallen asleep. Probably Mike’s mom even phoned Joyce and she’d just forgotten to tell him. That was probably it. Probably.

As he approached the car, Nancy gave him a thumbs up, and he was just starting to shake his head when he heard the sputtering clacks like slowed-down machine gun fire. He knew the sound because he’d

spent a full hour the previous summer showing the kids how to attach the bicycle playing cards to the spokes of their wheels with clothes pegs. When the bike really picked up speed, the cards would rattle off like artillery fire and make the rider believe they were speeding along on the world's fastest and most powerful motorcycle. He held up a finger to Nancy and scanned the crest of the hill leading down to Dustin's.

And there they came, four boys in a line, with four bikes clattering off a disjointed symphony of playing cards. In the silence of the early morning the sound was hopelessly loud, and Nancy got out the passenger seat.

"Well that's half a mystery solved."

"Half?" Jonathan asked without taking his eyes off the boys. He'd picked Will out of the lineup and was watching his progress intently.

"There they are. The other half is where they've been."

"Right." Jonathan agreed vacantly. Then he thought it over. "Right. Damn right. Where in the hell the kids have been. That's the other half." Abruptly the sounds sputtered out and stopped, and Jonathan raised an eyebrow. The boys had caught sight of them and stopped at the top of the hill. Nancy came up beside Jonathan and crossed her arms.

"What are we going to do with them?"

"Something horrible and creative. But first we should find out where they've been."

"Agreed." Nancy waved to the boys, who had not yet resumed their course. It was an unbalanced stand-off, but Mike had called out to stop and so they had. They wouldn't go again until he said so.

"It's Nancy and Jonathan down there."

"In front of my house. Oh *shit, shit* you guys what if my parents are down there too?" Dustin's voice had taken on a high and, in any

other circumstances, hilarious pitch.

“I think there’d be some yelling for proper if they were.”

“Jonathan wouldn’t have knocked for them. He’s just looking for me.” Will looked smaller than usual, and his mouth was set in a grim line.

“I should have called him from the Library. After what happened, he’s always worrying about me.”

“Nancy, too,” Mike added, and guilt began to fill him up as well.

“Well we better put ourselves out of our own misery,” Lucas said grimly, and began to push his bike again.

“I s’pose.” Mike agreed. “Though it’s worth pointing out that you have nothing to lose in this.” Lucas scoffed at this, but said nothing. There was no one waiting to skin *him* at the bottom of the hill, but there sure would be at home when Jonathan dropped him off and let his parents know. Which he would do, because Jonathan was kind of a dick, although Lucas would never tell Will that. The kid worshipped his older brother.

“Hey look Nance, take a look at that?”

“Jonathan, hey, I’m really so-“

“I hope he’s not gunna say he’s sorry, cuz that would be a real baby move, wouldn’t it Nance?”

“Oh yeah.” She grinned, and winked at Mike. “Oh yeah, no need to say sorry. You’re all grown men now, that’s why you think it’s okay to be out all night, right?”

“We-“

“I sure hope he’s not gunna make an excuse, cuz that would be a real baby move, wouldn’t it Jonathan?”

“Oh yeah. I think about the only thing they can really do now is tell us exactly where they’ve been all night. And it better be *good*.” The boys shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, uh." Mike started forward a little, making a split-second decision; he would tell. "We met some people in the Library."

5. Pennywise the Demogorgon

To an onlooker, the group inside the Library late that Wednesday evening would have looked very strange. Four boys clustered around one side of a chipped light wood desk, dirty palms and scuffed elbows on the surface. On the other side, four men and one woman, all middle-aged, conversing with these children with an absurd intensity. A strange company indeed.

“We aren’t telling you a thing about Eleven until you tell us something about you.” Lucas, ever the voice of reason, although it came as a surprise to all that he’d spoken so bluntly to an adult. Bill held his hands up, palms out in a gesture of surrender.

“You’re right, you’re absolutely right. Cards on the table and fair is fair. I can’t tell it all, I speak a little slowly as you might have noticed. I had a very bad stutter when I was growing up, and it comes back when I have to talk a lot.”

“People called him Stuttering Bill but he was Big Bill to us.” Ben glanced at Bill side on and smiled with genuine warmth.

“Our fearless leader.” Richie was solemn and serious. The telling of their story would be hard, and impossible to stop once it got started.

“I was not. Fearless I mean. I just hated It the most, I think.” He addressed the boys again now, who were looking at him with rapt concentration. All but Lucas, who looked a little more reserved and eyed the door approximately once every five seconds or so.

“It started in 1957 when the thing in the drains killed my little brother Georgie. Tore his arm right off and he died of blood-loss or maybe fright.”

“Like that Jamie kid,” Dustin hissed behind Mike, who shushed him. He’d drawn the comparison too.

“Right. I wasn’t chumming with all these guys back then, but we met in the summer of ’58 down in the Barrens, when Ben had been chased there by a real psycho bully who wanted to kill him.”

“Like Troy,” Dustin hissed, and Mike suppressed a groan.

“I know, we all get it, genius, now shut it.”

“I think every kid’s got a psycho bully set on messing with them a little, but this guy, Bowers, he wanted to mess with us a lot. Ben the most, but all of us. We found each other because of him, and we got to talking about some pretty weird shi-stuff we’d seen.” Beverly had tutted at him when he almost swore, though Bill had a good idea they did a bit of swearing themselves. Maybe not smoking like they had in ’58, but the cussing for sure. “By that time a few more kids had died, and a lot more had gone missing. It was chalked up to runaways, but I think everyone in town knew better.”

“I did a little looking into that later on, and Derry had a higher number of runaways across all age-groups than any other town in the USA. Including transient hot-spots in New York and California. It was weird.” Mike Hanlon said.

“We all saw It, the monster, before we met each other. We didn’t know it until we all told though. I saw it in my little brother Georgie’s picture album, he had his school picture in there and it... it changed, bled... it was trying to scare me maybe to death. And t-th-then B-b-b-“

“I saw It as a clown. I was walking home from the school late at night, in the winter before, and it had been standing out on the frozen lake. It tried to make me go to it, and I maybe would have but it was holding this big bunch of balloons and they weren’t going with the wind. It was spooky, so I turned around. Then it became a mummy and chased me.” Ben finished with a shudder.

“It was a teenage werewolf for me, in the house on Neibolt Street. I’d seen a horror flick at the movies just before.” Richie didn’t meet any of their eyes, and he didn’t elaborate.

“I heard voices coming out the kitchen sink, and then it spurted blood all over.” Beverly rubbed her fingers along her arm subconsciously, where goosebumps had formed.

“I was attacked by a giant bird-thing in this old abandoned iron

works. It exploded a few decades before and killed a lot of kids.” Mike Hanlon noticed the boys’ expressions of shock, and nodded. “There were a lot of tragedies in Derry. I guess no one really thought about it because It didn’t want us to.”

“Th-that’s right. And our friend Eddie saw a leper in the N-N-N-N-“

“Neibolt house, and our friend Stan saw two dead kids who had drowned near the park.” Beverly had cut across Bill as kindly as she could, but Bill’s face had reddened considerably and he was glaring down at the desk top, lips shaking with effort.

“It’s coming back, Big Bill,” Mike said quietly, dropping a hand onto his shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. “What does that say?”

“Says nothing. I-I-I just d-d-d-d-don’t like tal-talking about this.” Bill didn’t look up, but the flush on his cheeks darkened to a shade strikingly similar to what remained of his hair.

“We tried to kill it.” Richie continued smoothly, as though nothing had happened. “We shot it with a silver slug, and killed a part of it maybe, and wounded it for sure, but we didn’t kill it.”

“We shot stones at the Demogorgon when it came to the school.”

“S-suh-suh-sli-slinlingsho-ot?” Bill asked, in a way that wasn’t quite a question.

“Slingshot.” Lucas confirmed.

The adults shared a glance at that, although they hadn’t needed to. Everyone in the room could see the startling similarities between their stories.

“But ours didn’t change its shape. It was just a monster.” Lucas had a point.

“Yeah. It was ugly as hell, but it couldn’t change. Or talk. It was a real monster, all claws and roars and... you know. Eating kids.”

“The other one who disappeared when you did, Will, the older girl?”

“Demogorgon,” he whispered.

“Her name was Barb. She was my sister’s best friend. She found her in the Upside Down.”

“You have a sister?” Bill asked, stutter gone as if by magic.

“Sure. Two of them. None of you do?”

“I had a brother... before.” Bill reminded them. “But no, none of us do. Or... or kids.” They’d thought about what that could mean before, but hadn’t considered the fact that they were all only children, as well.

“Mike,” Dustin intoned from behind him. Mike didn’t want to turn around and face his friends. He could feel hot, disappointed tears stinging at his eyes. Their monster was not the same thing. They couldn’t help. And that was like losing Eleven all over again. Stupid, to let himself hope so openly. Stupid. “Mike, they’re not talking about the Demogorgon. It’s not the same monster, and they didn’t have the Upside Down. No weird ashy air for them. I think we should-“

“Weird, ashy air?” Ben had leant forward in his chair, and now he looked past Mike and focused on Dustin.

“Well yeah, that’s what Will said.”

“I didn’t mean ashy. It was like, these strings of something. Like cobwebs in a breeze or something. But everywhere. And where my mom and the Chief found me, it... it was like a web. Like the center of a web.”

“Bill...”

“I know.” Bill held up a hand to Ben and closed his eyes. “Sounds like the... spawn.”

“It can’t be!” Richie snapped, clattering his chair to the ground in his haste to stand. “It can’t be, tell them, Ben! Tell them you killed them all.” Ben was quiet, his eyes unfocused. Beverly clapped a hand to her mouth to hold in a sob.

“I...”

“Come on, you son of a bitch! Come on and spill it! Did you kill them all? For Eddie’s sake, did you do it?”

“I thought so... but... I can’t be sure. There were so many... I stamped over a hundred and I thought I got them all but-” The sound of Richie’s fist connecting with the side of Ben’s head was a meaty crunch. Ben didn’t raise his hands to block the blows, but Richie only landed one more before Bill held him back. No one had seen him get up, but authority radiated off him.

“Enough.”

“Bill, he didn’t kill them all! Three more kids dead because he let one of those goddamn monsters escape and-“

“We don’t know that. But what’s done is done.”

“We *do* know it! Look at the evidence!”

“No, all we know is there is some kind of monster here. There’s no explanation as to how it could have gotten from Derry to here, even if it had somehow escaped Ben, in case you hadn’t noticed, we are *not* in the tunnels under Maine. It couldn’t travel across the whole of the continental US, so why should its spawn be able to?” If the adults had not been so focused on the budding altercation between an enraged Richie and a reluctant Ben, they might have wondered at the look passed between and through the boys on the other side of the desks. They were all thinking the same thought, as though through a particularly smooth psychic link. *Eleven. El could do that. She coulda brought the monster here from just about anywhere.* Dustin cleared his throat, and Mike shook his head without turning around. It wasn’t time to tell them about Eleven. He’d mentioned her before because he hadn’t been able to help it, but he knew better now. Protecting Eleven and protecting her secret was something Mike had gotten real good at, and he intended to continue with that. For a while longer.

“Hey, uh, hey you guys. The.. spawn? What would that, um, what did that look like?” Mike had only meant to distract them, because whilst he knew *he* would protect El’s secrets, he couldn’t be sure, not 100%

completely sure, that the others would, too. No ow he'd spoken though, he realized it was a pretty good question. The monster they'd fought hadn't been a baby, that was for sure, but who knew how fast these things could grow? The It they were talking about could have been a lot older.

"You better take this one, Haystack." Richie spat the words, and Ben felt himself flush with anger and hurt before he cleared his throat.

"They were in these, sacs, kinda like eggs but you could see into them. They looked, god, they looked like mantis's, moving around slowly inside. When I stamped on the sacs and burst them out though, they looked mostly like spiders. But paler, maybe a few less legs. I don't... remember it all exactly. You know, Bill." He looked at Bill desperately, who nodded.

"I-It's ok-k-k-kay, Ben. W-we all f-f-f-forget b-b-b-bits of i-It." Ben looked relieved.

"It happens when we leave Derry. Happened the first time when we were kids, we moved away over the years and just forgot about it all. I can't explain it, it wasn't like a sudden wiping of *all* our memories, just a fading out. If someone asked me about the scar on my stomach, I could tell them that a boy named Henry Bowers had chased me into the barrens and cut it into me, and that he was crazy. But I couldn't tell you that I escaped Henry by running through the barrens and that I met Bill and Eddie on that day. If you asked me about the first girl I ever loved I could tell you it had been Beverly, but that was all I could tell you. Do you see?" Most of the boys shook their heads a little, but Will felt his own nodding.

"It's like when my dad left for good. I remember him, I remember that he's my dad and all, but he was so mean to my mom and to Jonathan. So I remember who he is but I'm losing the rest. Maybe losing the good as well as the bad." He looked down shyly, and Mike reached behind him to squeeze Will's hand briefly.

"Yes... I suppose it's similar to that. I was married and my husband died in Derry when we killed It for good, and that was only a little while ago but I'm already forgetting him." Ben grasped Beverly's hand across the desk and held it. She shot him a grateful smile.

“But you all remember now?”

“I guess that’s a good a reason as any to believe it’s not over. When we killed It, I was so sure it was done. I felt the facts slipping from my mind so quickly... but they hovered in the back like a glamour, and when I moved here and saw the article about the Becker boy, everything came down upon me like a ton of bricks, and I knew.” Mike Hanlon looked uncomfortable, but resolute.

“So, uh, if it’s not dead, how do we kill it? I mean, El disintegrated the thing with her mi-“

“Dustin, I swear to GOD!” Mike roared, turning on his friend.

“What did I-Oh!”

“We’re clearly not supposed to know about this, but given the circumstances...”

“The circumstances being Dustin’s big *mouth*, I swear to *God*, I-“

“We should tell them, Mike.” Lucas was looking at him levelly. “I wanna protect Eleven as much as you do, but she’s part of this. And... and if the Demogorgon isn’t dead then there’s a chance she isn’t either, right?”

“Right,” Mike whispered. “Right.” He turned to the adults again, laying his palms on the table. “I’m going to tell you. But I need you to promise me that we’ll help her. It’s not her fault, none of it. She saved us.”

“W-we unders-s-t-t-t-and.” Mike took a deep breath.

“We met her in the woods.”

6. The Girl in the Woods

The girl in the woods awoke from warm dream of kaleidoscope lights on a basketball court and Mike in a suit with his hair combed back. His face dissolved in the reality of the morning, cold but somehow devoid of weather. She breathed the poisoned air and reminded herself, again, that Mike was an impossible dream. She did not deserve Mike, or dances or kissing. She had killed her papa, brought the monster and then she hadn't even been able to kill it.

Since the night at the school, every day had been the same. She bunked down in a new place every couple of days, because although the monster wasn't smart he could find her if she lingered too long. She'd started off in Will's Fort, and moved around since then, mostly in the woods. She could sense the monster and thought she was sure it was getting stronger again, getting ready to go back and start killing again. She'd found holes in the trees in the Upside Down wood, and she knew they led back to the Right Way Up, and that if she walked through the forest on that side she could see Mike again, but she would not do it. It was better that he think her dead. If he knew she was trapped in here he'd come after her like he had when Will was trapped in here, and she would not let him die for her. The crackling, tinny radio she kept clipped to the collar of her dress buzzed into life.

"Eleven? You there kid?"

"I'm here." Eleven had learned to accept this voice in the radio. She knew, vaguely, who it was, but at the same time knew that it was not precisely Chief Hopper. The Chief Hopper she had known in the Right Side Up had wanted to help her, and he'd wanted to help Will. This Hopper, the one who had left her a box of Eggos and the radio and told her that the Hawkins National Laboratory was her FRIENDS and that they wanted to HELP and that they were the GOOD GUYS, this Chief Hopper was a liar. She knew this, but she listened, and sometimes she did what he told her to, because it was, in some way she didn't understand, very important.

"Where are you on the town map?"

"Forest. I can see the box."

“Okay, good! That’s good, kid. I left you some stuff, go check. Stay on the line.” Eleven approached the box, cautiously. The box itself was a mystery Eleven did not understand. It had first appeared about a week after the showdown at the school, and El had been sure it would be empty, or that whatever inside would have wilted away like everything else in the Upside Down, unable to survive. She’d found Eggos that first time, and opened them without any real hope; but they had been edible, more than edible, they’d been *delicious*. El didn’t know who had left them there, but they had almost certainly been for her. She never allowed the thought any traction, but she hoped it was Mike leaving them for her. She’d been shown otherwise the very next day, when the radio appeared along with more Eggos and bottled water. The first time the radio came to life in her hand she had dropped it, but recovered at the sound of Chief Hopper’s voice. She waited, hoping for Joyce too, but it was Hopper at the Lab that had been her home.

“What... is it?” She asked, looking down at the strange curl of cables and little black boxes at the bottom of the box. No food this time.

“It’s nothing to worry about, it’s just a science thing. You’ve been in there quite a long time, much longer than Will was, and that’s because you’re special, Eleven.” Hopper sounded like he was trying to be nice, but it was a lie. Eleven had learned to recognize a lie, especially in adults. His voice was all off.

“Special.” She repeated.

“Right, special! Finding out what makes you special is the key to solving where you are, kiddo. You see the little boxes?” eleven reached in and picked one up. It looked familiar, but she wasn’t sure.

“Yes.”

“Great, that’s great. You might know these, you’ve used them before, when you were doing science stuff for your papa, you remember?” The thought of her papa stung badly, but Hopper had brought the memory to the surface of her mind. She knew what to do with the boxes.

“I have to... again?”

"You do, you do Eleven. But it's alright, because it's only for a little while. You just need to put it on, and go for a walk."

"A... walk."

"That's it. That's all. Just for a few minutes, maybe to the edge of the woods and back. Then just put it all back in the box."

"Then food?"

"Sure, I'll bring out whatever you want. Eggos?"

"Yes please. And... candy."

"Alright. What candy would you like? Be putting those on now, there's a good girl." Eleven stumbled over the wrappers she'd seen in Mike's stash. She couldn't remember all of them, he'd given her a *lot* of candy during her time in the basement.

"Baby Ruth." El hoisted the deceptively heavy sensory equipment out of the box and began assembling and attaching it to herself with expert timing. She'd never had to put any of this on herself before, but she'd watched it put on her hundreds of times over the course of her life so she knew where everything went. Sensors on her head, at the temples and one at the base of her skull, two on her chest just below the collarbones, one on each wrist with the straps pulled tight, and the main belt cinched around her waist to keep it all in place whilst she moved.

"As much Baby Ruth as you can eat, and that's a promise. I can say that cuz I'm not paying for it... everything on?"

"Yes."

"Alright, you see the weird little tube left over? Should have been under all the sensory equipment." Eleven did. She hadn't seen this before, but it wasn't hard to guess where it was going.

"For breathing."

"That's right. That's good, kid. You just bite down on that tube and breath normally, try not to let any of your breath escape out, alright? When it's full it'll make a whirring noise. Then you can take it out. Just put it in the box with the rest when you're done."

“Okay.”

“We ready to go for a walk, Eleven?” Eleven was. She kept the radio clutched tightly in one hand as she made her way through the woods. The sensation of breathing into the tube was uncomfortable, and breathing out was harder still, but she managed. It was mercifully full after about a minute, and she took it out gratefully.

“Breathing done.”

“That’s good kid. Keep walking. Keep a look out for... for anything dangerous.” The fact of the monsters continued existence was one that both Eleven and Hopper knew, but did not discuss. Too complicated.

“Far enough?” There was static on the line while Hopper pretended he wasn’t consulting with the team of white coats running this relationship.

“Should be, if you turn around now and go back the way you came. No short cuts.” Eleven obeyed without answering, moving slowly and deliberately, taking note of the way her body moved in this atmosphere. It was almost like being in water, but you could move quicker than that. The feeling of lightness though, of *floating*; that was the same.

“Back.”

“Alright, that is great. That’s really great, kid. Put all the stuff back in the box now and I’ll get your food out to you, okay?”

“Okay. Bye, Chief.”

“Not Chief anymore, kid. Found a higher calling.” There was an edge to his voice that was a little like the edge of lying, but not quite. It was bitter.

“Say hi to Joyce for me,” Eleven snapped her mouth shut and dropped the radio with a clutter. She couldn’t believe she’d said it. The existence and wellbeing of their mutual acquaintances was another thing they did not discuss. She didn’t know what had made her say it, and she knew of course that he wouldn’t say hi to Joyce for her. If she really thought he might, she’d have asked for Mike,

right?

Eleven headed back for town, leaving the radio by the box. It would be safe there. The monster never came out this far, as though there was something about the box that repelled it. She knew from past experiences that it would take no more than a few minutes for the box to be filled, but felt no desire to stick around and watch the strange phenomenon of the break between realities. She ambled gently along Main Street, watching the papery tendrils of monster stuff ripple through the air. *Float, we all float in here El and you'll float too.* Eleven fell forward and felt hot pain clatter up her arm as she jarred her wrist on the ground. She didn't bleed, which was lucky. She had no intention of contracting an infection in *here*. But that hadn't been her thought. Her own thoughts had a kind of comfort to them, not in her voice precisely but in the voice of her mind. This voice was different. It was cruel and alien. Eleven was not unfamiliar with the idea of telepathy. She had intruded into people's heads before, when her papa told her to or when her friends were in danger. But no one had ever been able to get inside hers, and that was how she liked it.

"Not real." She grit her teeth and turned around, as though turning her back on Main Street would erase how unsettled she suddenly felt. She could hear the radio long before she could see the box. Hopper was shouting, real, panicked shouting, but El knew the panic wasn't for her. Himself, probably. She watched the radio jitter and blabber for a moment more with clinical, detached curiosity.

"I'm here." The line crackled briefly.

"Did you drop the radio? You mustn't ever do that kid, it's real important, okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay then." Hopper's voice had slowed down as he regained his composure. "It's the only way we can keep you safe."

"Okay." This was a lie. Eleven knew that they couldn't keep her safe. No one could. The tests to find out how she was surviving in here

were not designed to help her get out. They were probably to help other people get in. White coat men, or the poor people they put in the suits.

“I put all your food in the box, kid. Don’t eat it all at once, make yourself sick, kay?”

“Okay. I-“ She was maybe going to apologise for bringing up Joyce, she’d broken their unspoken agreement after all, but before she got a chance, the voice was back in her head. In her ear. *We all float in here, El, all your friends will float; Dustin Will Lucas Mike* “Stop it!” She screamed, slamming her hands to her ears. *Mike! Mike! Mike!* The voice shrieked. Eleven screamed louder. She was not surprised to see the radio had been smashed when she screamed. She was not surprised to find blood make a path down her face and pooling above her lip in the familiar nosebleed. She was, however, a little surprised to find the voice had gone away.

7. Joyce Byers and the DJ

It was not going to happen again. Nope, nope, absolutely not. She'd been duped, that was for sure, but it was *not going to happen again*. Hop had been around a few times, mostly milling around at the foot of the porch, too chickenshit to even knock on the door. He knew what she'd say, knew she'd tell him to get the hell off her property, even though she didn't *want* to send him away. It was hard to believe only weeks ago she'd been thinking about what he'd look like slumped on her couch with a beer in one hand. What it would be like going on vacation with him and the boys. About him teaching Will how to shave. Stupid stuff, like that. She'd been so sure of who he was. That had changed now though, she'd been duped because she'd been vulnerable, and it was not going to happen again.

But even though she knew this, the nights didn't get any less lonely. She wanted to drink to take the edge off, but she couldn't do it in the house. Will didn't know, but Jonathan was observant. So she went out, and usually managed to get home before the boys woke up. *Usually*. Last night had been a particularly rough one; she'd lost her keys and forgotten where she'd parked which was probably for the best, but it meant she'd had to walk home almost ten miles in the middle of the night. There had been a time when she'd have called Hop without hesitation, but he was probably as drunk as she was now. He'd been drinking a lot more since he started working for the Hawkins National Laboratory. Joyce could see why. She knew what went on there. She even had a vague idea of why Hop was working there now, but she didn't want to think about that stuff.

By the time she got into the town proper, the sun had risen and people were beginning to move around behind the curtains in their bedrooms. This was going to be... embarrassing. Joyce knew what she looked like right now. Like hell, that's what. She dipped her head down and stared at the pavement as she began power walking through central.

"Hey, Jay-SUS Lady, watch where yah walkin'!" Joyce body-slammed into someone coming out of the Library and stumbled back with a

little yell. It had been a very, very unexpected collision. Joyce knew the morning had begun but it wasn't any later than 5 or 5 thirty. Certainly not late enough for the Library to be open. She lifted her head and locked eyes with a strikingly attractive man. He wore chunky-rimmed glasses, and he pushed these up his nose in an endearing way as he looked her over.

"Sorry."

"No, Senhora, it is I who should be sorry. For I have bumped an angel right off her path." He dropped her a wink and a lazy, boyish smile. "Richie. Richie Tozier." He stuck out his hand. Joyce looked at it dumbly, her head spinning. It had been this man talking to her both times, and yet there had been two different voices, surely? But no, that was crazy. It had been him both times. What a headfuck.

"Joyce. Uh, Byers. You're good at that."

"Ayuh, thank you ma'am. Can I call you Joyce?"

"Yeah, o-of course you can. I um- I haven't seen you around before?"

"No, you wouldn't have, I'm just passing through. Visiting, more like. Staying a while."

"Right. All those things, then." Richie laughed and nodded. Joyce thought she might have even seen a little blush creep up his handsome face.

"Right. You live in town, then?"

"Little ways out, but yeah."

"Well I hope I run into you again" He looked her up and down again, appreciatively, and Joyce felt her body flush. "A lot."

"I... I would like that, too." Richie smiled big, all teeth. It was kind of goofy, kind of kid-like, but Joyce felt herself smiling back. He really was kind of cute, but it was *not going to happen again*. She would not let herself be duped by a man, whether it be a complicated stormy drunk cop or a goofy out-of-towner who hung around Libraries at 5AM.

“Well I’ll see you around, Joyce Byers.” Richie tipped an imaginary cap at her, and turned in the direction of the Hawkins Town House. Joyce headed quicker down Main Street, aware that with each passing minute she was more and more likely to be spotted by one of the PTA moms. “Hey, Byers?” She spun on her heel. Richie had turned a few paces up and was looking at her.

“Yeah, uhuh.”

“As in Will? You Will’s mom?”

“Yep. Will is my son.”

“Huh. Small world. Small town. Alright.” He turned to walk away again, but Joyce was sure she saw the ghost of something troubled on his face. Joyce had gotten several streets further before she realised this stranger had known her son’s name.

Richie Tozier had been troubled all right. What were the chances that the first person he’d meet in this town would be the mother of the boy who had caused all this in the first place? I mean, he couldn’t catch a break! Women were always crazy, married or direct relations to members of his messed up monster-fighting gang. What are the chances? The question wasn’t a casual one, and it sat heavy in his mind. Why had he decided to leave the Library first, and alone? He’d meant to wait for Bill so they could walk over to the townhouse together and wait for it to open, but he hadn’t. Something (It, It’s It, It’s It, It’s It) had told him to leave right then and there. So he could bump into Joyce Byers? Pretty Joyce Byers, with yesterday’s makeup smudged on her eyes and mouth, and liquor on her breath? Yes, something had made that happen. He wasn’t all that upset about it, anyway.

Joyce’s own thoughts were not all that unlike Richie’s. She was thinking about him, too, and she felt hot little flushes when she remembered the way he’d looked her up and down, very much adult, and the way he’d smiled like a goofy kid, and how right that

combination had been. How it had made her feel. How he'd said her name... and then how he'd said Will's. Cold flushed through her at that thought. He'd known Will's name. Was he connected to the horrors of last year some how? Connected to Hawkins National Laboratory? She couldn't be sure. She didn't want to think about it, but strange men didn't just make acquaintance with eleven-year-old boys. There was almost certainly something sinister about it. Cute boy or not, he was probably trouble, and she would not fall for it.

The house was mercifully quiet when Joyce slipped in at just gone 6AM. If she'd known that quiet, in this case, meant empty, she'd have been a little less relieved. A few streets over, her boys were headed towards the forest with grim determination on their faces and rocks and slingshots in their pockets.

8. Enter Mirkwood

Before the monster had come, the boys had loved to play in the woods, especially in the long, hot summers when the shade from the trees would provide some blissful cool in the late afternoon. Since the monster, since the night they'd found Eleven out there, the woods hadn't felt the same. They'd felt sinister and hateful and *quiet* in a way that very young boys couldn't articulate. It maybe felt a little better with Nancy and Jonathan there, but Mike would never in a million years admit that to his sister.

"We're close now." Nancy's voice was soft but it still cut into the silence of the forest.

"It's... too quiet, isn't it? Isn't it?" Jonathan's voice wasn't much louder than Nancy's but it sounded jagged in the eerie silence.

"No birds." Dustin whispered. That was it, that was it exactly. No birds, no cracking twigs under hoof or paw, not even the rustling of branches lifted by the light breeze. It was as if the forest was frozen.

"Mirkwood." Mike whispered. No one questioned him, not even Nancy, who hadn't read any of the Lord of the Rings books because they weren't for girls and Steve had said they were lame. *Steve* was lame. Jonathan was cool though.

"There." Nancy's voice wasn't even audible, but they all felt rather than heard what she said. Jonathan reached behind him for Will's hand. Yeah, Jonathan was cool. He didn't care about *being* cool and he was nice to his brother. That made him even cooler, and Mike wished, not for the first time, that he had a brother. Two sisters were... it just wasn't as cool, that's all. He slipped through Dustin and Lucas to position himself a little in front of Nancy all the same though.

"What is it?"

"It goes to the... other place. I've been in one."

"The Upside Down? It goes to the Upside Down?"

"I guess so." Mike took another step towards the split, leaking tree. It looked sick, and he knew he shouldn't breathe that stuff coming out of it, but he'd started thinking about how they'd found Eleven in the woods, and if she was in the Upside Down, that's where she'd be, maybe. And if she was right *there* on the other side of that tree, then he had to try and get to her, didn't he? He had to-

"Mike!" Nancy yanked him backwards and behind her.

"Get off me!" Mike spun, saw everyone was looking at him. Nancy looked angry, but Will looked sad. Just... sad. His face flushed with embarrassment and anger and a sadness so sad he couldn't contain it. So he ran. Away from his friends, and his sister, and the stupid tree with the stupid hole in it. He ran and ran and didn't stop until he was made to. Mike had never been graceful and he'd sucked in PE, and besides, he was running on pure adrenalin. He didn't see the stump in time, and his foot slammed into it with a flinching impact, throwing him face-first into the dirt. Pain jolted up his leg and Mike was pretty sure he'd broken some of his toes.

The pain only magnified his hurt and rage, and he turned on his knees, ready to pry the stump out of the ground and smash it into a pulpy mess. But it wasn't a stump. It was a well-camouflaged box, blending naturally with the surrounding exposed roots and weathered stumps in this part of the forest. In fact, looking back down his hastily torn path, it was lucky Mike hadn't tripped up on any number of hazards before he'd reached this point. He *should* have, almost undoubtedly. But he hadn't, he'd tripped on this box, because that was where he was supposed to trip. It doesn't often occur to children to think about concepts like fate or a higher power, but this thought occurred to Mike Wheeler at that moment. Something or someone had made him trip at that moment on that box. Where Bill Denbrough would have said 'Pennywise', or Lucas might have said 'Demogorgon', Mike thought '*Eleven*' and opened the box.

"Jonathan!" Nancy sounded panicked, and Jonathan knew he should have started running a full five seconds ago, but he'd frozen. Will,

Dustin and Lucas had taken up the chase immediately, and he could barely hear their crashing progress through the forest now. Nancy had waited for him, but wouldn't wait long. Jonathan knew, *knew* he should have started running a full five seconds ago, but he couldn't. He couldn't, because he thought he might piss his pants in a second. There was music coming out of the hole. The Clash's 'Should I Stay or Should I Go' was coming out of the hole. It was a little distorted, like when he put his stereo right up and ducked his head under in the bathtub, but the song was unmistakable.

Darling you've got to let me know- "Jonathan we're losing them we've got to go after them!"

Should I stay or should I go- "Jonathan! It's not safe in here and Mike's just a kid!"

If you say that you are mine- "He's my *brother*, Jonathan what the hell is wrong with you!"

"I'll be here til the end of time- "You're really a piece of shit, you know that?" Nancy turned and ran down the path, away from him.

Oh I'll be here alright, I've been here since the beginning and I'll be here at the end and you'll float, Jonathan! You and Nancy and Will, we'll ALL float! That voice was not the voice of Mick Jones and it wasn't his own, either. Jonathan felt something like a steel string snap inside his brain, and lost his legs. He was looking up at the sky now, a circle of white pierced here and there by the jags of tree branches. He watched with some amusement as it began to snow, even though he knew it could not be snowing. As the snowflakes began to land on his face, they sizzled holes into his skin, and Jonathan began to scream.

"Did you see where he went?" Lucas screamed.

"Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus the Demogorgon got Mike!" Dustin mashed his hat down onto his head.

"Shut up! He's alright, he's just run off! He's such an *idiot!*" Lucas seethed. They could hear crashing behind them.

“Keep going.” Dustin said, and they both began to run again. Neither were particularly good trackers, but Dustin knew his way around to a degree of accuracy that was almost spooky.

“Left here,” he called out, and Lucas followed without question. He’d never steered them wrong... except for when Eleven had screwed his compass up. That was the only time though.

“What’s that... wait!” Dustin slammed his arm out and caught Lucas across the stomach. There was something up ahead in their path, a little down a slope. It was hunched over, moving...

“It’s Mike! Get outta my way!” Lucas shoved Dustin’s arm away and barreled down the hill towards the shape.

It was indeed Mike. He’d opened the box about a minute ago, but hadn’t been able to move since. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting to find, but what he *had* found was more than he could have hoped for. It was nothing and everything. The box was empty, but it was not empty.

“Mike!” He could hear Lucas yelling behind him and the temptation to slam the box shut, to hide it somehow, was almost overwhelming. But why? Why shouldn’t his friends know? They could help. They would help, when they saw what he’d found. He closed the box gently and turned on his heels, half-shielding the box from the approaching footsteps. If Nancy was with them, or even Jonathan, he would hide it and come back when they were alone. But it was just Lucas, Dustin a few paces behind and Nancy nowhere in sight.

“Guys! Be quiet. Shhh, please you gotta.” Lucas and Dustin slowed to a walk, eyeing Mike’s crouched position.

“Mike... what’s going on? Why’d you run?”

“I found something. You- I ... look!” Mike slipped to the side and opened the lid of the box. Dustin and Lucas leaned to look, without taking any further steps towards it. They were still eyeing Mike with weary expressions.

“Treasure box. Cool.” Dustin smiled, but his eyes were distrustful.

“Not a treasure box. Look *inside*.”

“It’s... trash?” Mike resisted the urge to shove him.

“It’s *not* trash. Look!” He reached in, half afraid his hand would go right through the box like a mirage, but it didn’t. He un-crumpled the distinct packaging of a box of Eggos. This was supposed to be the moment of great understanding. Dustin and Lucas would recognize what this meant, and then the real mission could start. The Rescue El Mission. That was how it was supposed to go. So Mike was nothing short of stunned to find Dustin sighing, Lucas shaking his head, and both of them turning away from him.

“Mike...”

“What? Don’t you see? This is her. She left this here!”

“Why?” Lucas asked, voice uncharacteristically soft.

“I don’t know. For us, maybe.”

“It’s freaky but... it’s just a coincidence.” Dustin wouldn’t meet his eyes. Mike felt his blood boil for a moment, and then cool down into a stagnant, muggy chill.

“Alright. Yeah. You’re probably right. A coincidence.” He smiled at his friends, felling not at all guilty for this false front. Had they betrayed him? Maybe they had. Or maybe they just weren’t ready to believe, maybe they didn’t miss El like he did. Actually, Mike was *sure* they didn’t miss El like he did. She didn’t belong to them like she did to him. It was... hard to explain. He’d know the right words for what he was feeling one day, when he could hold her hand in front of everyone like Ben and Beverly had in the Library.

“Well... your sister’s going nuts back there, so we should go find her.”

“Uh-huh. I’m right behind you. I gotta tie my laces, don’t wanna trip up on junk again.” The lie was smooth, and his shoelace *was* untied.

“Oh... kay. Catch up.” The two boys turned and headed up the path. Mike waited until they’d passed over the crest of the hill, and then he

spun his backpack off and unzipped it. He pulled his Comms Radio out and unlatched the box, placing the radio at the bottom and closing it again. He sighed, deliberated taking it out again. His mom would *kill* him if he lost such an expensive present, but... He squeezed his eyes shut and mouthed a hasty kiss onto the lid.

“Hope you’re there, El.” He whispered against the musty wood.

9. The Boys Come Clean

By the time the boy's had finished their story, the fates of all in the Library had subtly but fundamentally become entwined.

"We weren't supposed to be out that night."

"Enforced curfew," Lucas added.

"Because I'd gone missing," Will finished.

"Right. But I radioed Lucas because I was going crazy sitting at home when we should have been looking for Will. We rode out to Mirkwood--"

"M-M-M-M--"

"It's the woods out where Chief Hopper found Will's bike." Mike had already picked up the art of stepping in for Bill when he stuttered.

"I cut through there to get home cuz we played D&D too late and I knew Jonathan, my brother Jonathan, would have a bird if I was home much later."

"Yeah, so we headed into Mirkwood. We left Dustin to be lookout, but he was too chicken to stay alone." Dustin shoved Mike between the shoulder blades, and he rolled with the blow, grinning.

"Wasn't chicken."

"I know. So anyway. We went into Mirkwood, we were all calling for Will. It was raining real hard, we could hardly see anything."

"But you heard something, right Mike?"

"Yeah. Dustin was saying something about going back and I could hear this, like this rustling and something else, some weird other noise but I don't remember it really. Then there she was, outta nowhere."

"Eh-Eh-leven?"

“Right. She was soaked, and freezing. I knew we had to get her inside, so we took her back to my house.”

“We did *not* all agree to that part,” Lucas reminded him. Mike rolled his eyes.

“No, they thought she was crazy, but I figured she was maybe just scared. Her head was all shaved, and she didn’t really speak or anything, and the guys figured she’d broken out of the Nuthouse over at Pennhurst. But she hadn’t.”

“Well, she *had* broken out of somewhere, but it was a Science Lab place where they were experimenting on her.” Dustin put in.

“Yeah, I was getting to that,” Mike hissed, holding a hand up to silence his less-than-helpful friends. The adults were listening in silence, expressions grave. They believed him so far, which was good. The next part would be the kicker.

“She knew Will. Or, knew who he was, and where he was. She showed us about the Upside Down, by taking our D&D board and flipping it and putting the Demogorgon on that side. Like that, see?” Mike mimed flipping the board. Everyone nodded.

“That was a terrible visual aid,” Dustin muttered, and Mike shushed him.

“Anyway, so she said she knew where Will was, but then they found his body in the quarry we got real mad at her. But... she had powers. Like, real powers.”

“Superhero stuff.” Dustin agreed.

“Superhero stuff like how. Specifics, kiddos,” Richie said.

“Like... she could move stuff with her mind. And she could make the radio pick up signal in the Upside Down. She let us hear Will on it. That’s how we knew he was alive.” Mike explained.

“I thought they found his body in the quarry.” Beverly said.

“Where they found the Beckers boy,” Mike Hanlon added.

“Yeah, but that was a fake.” Mike shrugged.

“A fake *body*” Beverly asked, raising one eyebrow. “Who would do that?”

“The Science Lab, right?” Ben had been the most quiet, but now he looked thoughtful.

“Right.” Mike agreed. “They kept Eleven since she was a baby I think. She didn’t have parents or anything. She... she opened the Upside Down and let the Demogorgon in, but she didn’t mean to! It wasn’t her fault, they *made* her do it. They *made* her. And she stopped it!” Mike was rambling, words flying out. He felt Lucas’s hand on his arm and shrugged it off.

“They made her. Okay, that’s alright, Mike. We understand. Go on.” Ben nodded encouragingly.

“So she showed us where he was, kinda. That he was alive, at least. She knew he was hiding in the Upside Down. She showed Chief Hopper and Joyce, Will’s mom that is, showed them how to get in. They found Will. Nancy, my sister and Jonathan were gunna fight the Demogorgon because it killed Barb and she was Nancy’s best friend. It’s drawn by like, blood and stuff.”

“That’s why it came to the school, when it was just us and Eleven there.”

“The people from the Science Lab came to the school to get Eleven. She... protected us.” Mike couldn’t bring himself to say...

“She killed them all. With her mind.” Dustin breathed.

“And that brought the Demogorgon.” Ben summarized.

“Yeah. We had an epic showdown. Lucas had his slingshot, we’d picked out some really perfect stones for it, and I think we hurt it.”

“Got a couple of good shots in,” Lucas smiled. Beverly winked at him.

“But it wasn’t enough.” Mike said quietly. “Eleven knew, she probably knew right from the start. I didn’t even really get to say

goodbye, she just... she destroyed it.”

“Disintegrated it,” Dustin whispered.

“And then it was gone, and so was she.” Lucas finished.

Mike glared at the shabby carpet of the Library floor, swallowing over and over. The lump rising in his throat would not be swallowed. Bill noticed this, and cleared his throat.

“S-So the D-D-D- It died, but n-not the g-g-g-girl?”

“Well...” Dustin and Mike glanced at each other, looking uncomfortable. Mike shook his head, not yet trusting himself to speak.

“You think she survived, because of her powers?” Beverly asked, softly. She reached forward and placed a hand on Mike’s shoulder. He looked up, and felt a sense of calm wash over him. She was lovely. Not like Eleven, but lovely.

“We’d know. I... I’d know if she was dead.”

“I survived in there a while,” Will pointed out.

“And El is way tougher than you,” Dustin added. Will smiled.

“So I hear. I hope I get to meet her someday. Soon.”

“U-us t-t-too.” Mike looked up and met Bill’s eyes.

“You believe us.”

“O-of c-course w-w-we do.”

“And... you’ll help us? Get Eleven back?”

“If we can kiddo, if we can.” Richie said solemnly.

“Well c’mon then!” Mike burst, spinning on his heel.

“Mike... wait...” Beverly said.

“For what?”

“The sun is just about coming up, boys.” Ben pointed out. “If your parents wake up this morning and find none of you are in your beds, what happens?”

“Grounding.” Will said.

“Grounding of *epic proportions*, Dustin added.

“Right. And I think we could all do with some rest. Go home, get a few hours of sleep. Meet us back here,” Ben glanced at Mike Hanlon, who was unlocking the front door, “at five, we can use Mike’s office. We have more to talk about.”

“What more is there?” Mike asked, exasperated.

“Well for one thing, we haven’t told you about how we defeated It. There was no disintegration, but we should still compare notes.”

“I guess that makes sense. Okay.” Mike nodded and shouldered his backpack on.

“Uh, Mike?” Beverly again. He turned to her. She was hunched forward a little, and looked nervous. “I had a question. Uh, if the monster, the Demo-whatever, is dead... why is your friend still in the Upside Down?” It was something Mike had thought about a lot, had lost sleep over. It wasn’t something he’d discussed with Lucas and Dustin and Will because their belief in Eleven being alive at all was already so shaky. Having his concern voiced out loud *sucked*.

“She has her reasons.” Will spoke up. His voice was quiet, but sure and strong.

“What d’you mean?” Mike turned on Will, hyper-focused. Will hadn’t had a lot of input in the retelling of Eleven’s story because he hadn’t had much input in Eleven’s story the first time around. But he *had* really been in the Upside Down, and he knew the Demogorgon better than anyone except for maybe Eleven. If he knew something... something that could help them find Eleven...

“Mike, I-“

“I think it’s best to wait until this afternoon.” Mr. Hanlon’s voice was authoritative and left no room for arguing.

“Okay.” Mike took a deep breath. “Back here, at five. Guys?” On cue, the boys shouldered their backpacks and followed Mike out into the early morning. No one was out yet, which was good, but the boys with their oversized bikes were not inconspicuous.

“The road less travelled?” Dustin asked.

“Ayup,” Mike agreed.

Author's Note:

As a huge fan of both Stephen King and Stranger Things, I couldn't help but notice the similarities between ST and IT, my all-time favourite novel. I've had to rejig the timeline to make the two stories I want to tell fit together better, as in the true timeline of IT the Loser's Club defeat the monster of Derry in 1985, two whole years after Will Byers is snatched by the monster of Hawkins in 1983. Please forgive me the mincing of dates!